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Abstract: *»Freundschaft, Verwandtschaft und Zugehörigkeit in den Briefen städtischer Armer 1800-1940«*. This article is driven by an attempt to understand how early nineteenth century urban paupers thought about, experienced and described their belonging to their host parishes and what, if anything, made their experiences different from rural counterparts. It uses pauper narratives – letters written by, for or about paupers – to systematically consider these questions. While such narratives pose problems of orthography, truthfulness and representativeness, the article argues that these potential issues can be overplayed. Using these narratives, the article suggests that urban and rural paupers shared a common language and sentiment of belonging to their parishes of legal settlement. However, the article moves on to suggest that urban paupers also showed distinctive rhetorical strategies and experiential trajectories, talking systematically about the depth of their belonging to a host community, about the occasional fragility of that belonging and about being linked into strong neighbourhood, friendship and kinship networks.

Keywords: paupers, pauper narratives, urbanisation, friendship, neighbourhood, belonging, settlement, poor law, sickness, old age, London.

This article sits at the confluence of three major debates on English social history: Firstly, on the issue of belonging and sense of place. Keith Snell's recent book (Snell 2006) has suggested that parish and town communities were shot through with multiple mechanisms by which people might establish or maintain an identity, but that, at least until the later nineteenth century, a sense of belonging to a particular place was something that ordinary people valued. Of course belonging was multi-layered – the legal status of belonging created by settlement law[1], the custom of belonging created by long-residence, a belonging created by participation in local institutions or by paying taxes, a belonging defined in a negative sense by not being something else – and could be bestowed as well as earned. Belonging might also be fragile or contested, as for instance when labour market crises led parishes to fall back on settlement law as the ultimate determination of belonging or when migrants crossed moral boundaries and began to dig away the foundations of their acceptance. Yet, and

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[1] On English and Welsh settlement law, see Snell (1992).

as Keith Snell has shown with myriad examples, signifying one's sense of belonging to a place was common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries even in situations where the strategic value of such a notation was slim or non-existent. Having a place mattered. This said, the question of how the sense and signifiers of belonging transferred themselves across the life-cycle or from the rural to urban environment is unclear. For poor people in particular, a notion of belonging may have been better developed at later stages of the life-cycle or for those who were married rather than single. In terms of an urban setting, even in the smaller towns of provincial or industrial England, a sense of belonging, if it existed in the first place, must have been to neighbourhood, kinship group, work and religious networks or networks of patronage, rather than simply to place. Urban belonging was also likely to be fragile given the frequency with which intra-town moves took place and the constant turnover of immigrant populations. How far, then, did paupers moving to or living in urban areas develop a sense of local belonging, and how did they experience and express this sense vis-à-vis paupers living in or moving to rural areas? If we can detect the language of belonging in sources relating to paupers, how should we distinguish between rhetoric related to the experience and status of belonging and that related to belonging as a negotiating tool to garner community resources?

A second debate is over the nature of kinship and friendship. We have now moved away from a notion of English kinship patterns as somehow shallow and weak. Family historians (Barrett 2003; Cooper and Donald 1995; Coster 1993) have shown persuasively that in urban or industrialising areas in particular it was common for kin to live proximately and even for households to be much more complex in kinship terms than the existing secondary literature allows. Yet, much of this literature has focused on middling or artisanal groups and the kinship experiences of the urban poor remain significantly under-researched, a reflection of both source limitations and conventional methodology for analysing kinship. It is thus difficult to see if the poor were locked into extensive and functional kinship networks and whether these may have provided an alternative focus to belonging in urban versus rural areas. And if we can make these observations with respect of kinship, it applies even more forcefully to friendship. The excellent work of Tadmor (2000) contains little by way of sophisticated socio-economic typologising, and almost all of the literature stressing the importance of friendship as an emotional, practical and physical response to the stresses of life has dealt with the middling and aristocratic groups. What role, then, for friendship networks in the coping strategies, rhetoric and scaffolding of belonging for the urban poor?

A third debate is over the meaning and function of neighbourhood. In contrast to our understanding of English kinship patterns where rural perspectives dominate, analysis of urban (particularly large urban) neighbourhoods underpins our understanding of neighbourhood dynamics. We now understand that neighbourhoods were a vital locus of credit, emotional support and control,

childcare, work contacts and alternative income strategies such as pawning or crime. While the complexion of neighbourhoods changed, while people moved into and out of neighbourhoods (albeit not without some consideration) and the boundaries of neighbourhoods (or at least neighbourhood networks) are difficult to pin down, neighbourhoods have nonetheless become one of the building blocks of our understanding of English urban history (Clark 1984; Clark 2000). And yet outside of crime history or histories of street culture (Shore 2002; Hitchcock and Shore 2003; Hitchcock 2004), our understanding of poorer urban neighbourhoods remains thin. Even thinner is our understanding of the meaning of neighbourhood to the poor, its functionality (in a practical and rhetorical sense) to them, and its extent. This neglect in part reflects a wider lack of primary research on the poor and (more marked) the urban poor law prior to its reform in 1834.[2] The work of Boulton (2000) clearly identifies London as a gaping hole in poor law historiography, but the same might be said of several ranks of provincial towns, stretching from a mere 2-3,000 upwards. As Alannah Tomkins (2006) has suggested, the urban poor and the urban poor law could demonstrate very distinctive experiences and features when compared to rural areas.

Reflecting the focus and weaknesses of these debates, this article will engage with the issue of 'belonging' amongst the English urban poor. Using pauper narratives – letters written by, on behalf of or about paupers as they sought to establish entitlement to relief under the English Old Poor Law[3] – from a variety of urban contexts and manipulated using NVIVO it will suggest that we can obtain a systematic quantitative and qualitative overview of four key issues. In particular the article will ask: How did paupers resident in urban areas use the rhetoric and strategy of belonging, neighbourhood, friendship and kinship in their attempts to establish or maintain entitlement? Were such rhetorics a distinctive motif for urban as opposed to rural paupers? Did the likelihood of using the rhetoric of belonging vary according to life-cycle stage? And how can we begin to reconcile the rhetoric and actual experiences of urban paupers when it comes to a sense of belonging? The analysis will concentrate on the period between 1800 and 1834, the so called 'crisis' of the Old Poor Law, a period in which it is often asserted that the English poor (particularly the urban poor) lost their legitimacy in the eyes of ratepayers, and thus a period in which paupers might be expected to focus most keenly on the rhetorical strategies that they thought would advance their claims both absolutely and vis-à-vis others.

[2] On the 1834 reforms, see Snell (2006).
[3] On the Old Poor Law see Hindle (2004) and Hollen Lees (1998).

2. Pauper Letters as a Source

Pauper letters arise out of the practice (never legalised) of attempts by poor law officials and paupers to avoid the disruption and costs of the settlement system. Crudely, when a (by definition migrant) pauper fell into poverty in a place other than their parish of settlement, they had no right to request poor relief from their host parish (Snell 2006). Faced with this lack of entitlement, they might write or get someone (overseers, surgeons, friends etc) to write on their behalf asking their parish of settlement to relieve them in the current place of residence, rather than returning to the parish of settlement King 2005). Overseers could dispute their liability for that pauper under settlement law, but where responsibility was clear they might find various ways of transmitting money to the pauper, often paying less than would be the case for an equivalent poor person within the parish. The 'out-parish relief system' thus appealed to parish economy at the same time as it prevented the disruption and costs associated with settlement law. While the extent of the system has always been unclear, it is now apparent that early work (Hitchcock, King and Sharpe 1997; Fontaine and Schlumbohm 2000) on such pauper narratives barely scratched the surface of surviving collections (King, Nutt and Tomkins 2006). Even where letters themselves do not survive, they are often recorded as being received, read and replied to in the accounts of overseers of the poor or in minute books from committees of ratepayers. Sometimes parishes kept separate account books for those who they paid outside the parish or non-settled poor for whom they received relief from other parishes, but where they did not keep such accounts basic record linkage suggests that in many places at least 40% of paupers recorded might actually be getting their relief elsewhere. In short, pauper letters were 'built-in' to the very fabric of the poor law system (King 2007), allowing us to systematically analyse the words, feeling and experiences of the poor themselves and those who were concerned with their welfare.

Naturally, pauper letters are not unproblematic as a source. Often they are difficult to read, varying between barely legible orthographic spelling with little structure, to formal and stylised petitions, through a range of more or less well-written derivatives, though the vast bulk of letters tend towards the legible end of this spectrum, as Figures 2 and 3 in the appendix (showing early nineteenth century letters written to Peterborough) show.[4] Certainly, the idea that poor people were illiterate is thrown into doubt by these narratives. In turn, whatever the problems of reading such sources, Thomas Sokoll (2001; 2006) has argued persuasively that it is possible to classify letters into three basic types and, with experience, to read the intent behind poor orthographic writing or formulaic expression.

[4] Though formal petitions of the sort analysed by contributors to van Voss (2001), are rare

Questions of provenance (that is, were pauper letters written by the people whose names appear on them) are potentially more difficult. Thus, there are certainly instances in which the handwriting in letters apparently written by different paupers is exactly the same, while the Old Bailey Online site contains several instances of people who were employed as letter writers, possibly on behalf of the poor.[5] Yet, the fact that authorship is sometimes uncertain does not mean that the sentiments, experiences and rhetoric built into the infrastructure of the letters bear little resemblance to those of the paupers who were the subject of them. Indeed, it is quite plausible to imagine the destitute and desperate poor narrating their case to a scribe.[6] In any case, detailed consideration of a given set of pauper letters suggests that provenance is at best a minor problem (king 2007a). On the other hand, issues of representatives are more intractable. It is thus inescapable (and notwithstanding the fact that more than 10,000 letters and associated pieces of correspondence have been discovered to date) that the majority of pauper letters that must have been sent do not survive. While those that are available to us seem to have survived through various random acts of preservation, and thus to be a broadly representative subsample, we can never be absolutely sure of this fact. Nor can we be certain that the rhetoric, strategies and concerns expressed in pauper letters were representative of those of the settled poor who did not need to write letters because they could make a case in person. This said, family reconstitution studies indicate strongly that those who remained settled in a parish over their entire lives were a minority. For the poor, this minority was even smaller and for the urban poor, smaller still. Thus, while it may be true that the proximately resident poor could have had different concerns from the out-parish poor, or may have employed different means/rhetorics for establishing their entitlement, it is the proximately resident poor who properly ought to be seen as unrepresentative. And of course, there are good reasons – not least the recording of official and pauper encounters in the vestry book – to think that paupers across the piece had similar concerns and strategies.

A further potential problem with pauper narratives as a source lies in the interlinked issues of accuracy and truthfulness. Crudely, it would be easy to assume that because these were communications from outside the daily inspection ambit of local officials, paupers deployed rhetoric learnt from others, provided information selectively, and tailored the circumstances described and the rhetoric used so as to appeal to the (known) propensities of those with whom they were dealing. After all, pauper letters were multi-functional documents combining reportage, fact, posturing, rhetoric and circumstance. In fact, Thomas Sokoll (2000) has shown that overseers found it easy to engineer inspec-

[5] www.oldbaileyonline.org.

[6] On the enduring relationship between oral and literate culture, see contributions to Raven/Small/Tadmor (1996), and Fox/ Woolf (2002).

tions of the poor, and he has urged us to consider the vast bulk of pauper letters truthful. Certainly parish overseers represented a formidable network, making use of a wide set of connections, to counter fraud. By way of example we might note an overseer in the county town of Leicester (Leicestershire) responding to his counterpart in Market Harborough (on the Northamptonshire/Leicestershire border) on 25th February 1823

> Sir,
> In answer to your communication of the 19th Inst. relative to Widow Stringer I have to inform you no such Person has ever applied to St Mary's for relif consequently the rest of *her tale is a fabrication as to removal* and I take pleasure in exposing her, this is *one of many impositions I have exposed of Paupers endeavouring to impose on Parishes* to which they belong
> I am Sir,
> your Obd. sert
> J. Deakins
> Overseer[7]

Deakins was not by any means unique (an issue to which we return when trying to unpick rhetoric and reality), powerful reinforcement of Sokoll's message that the out-parish poor could be, and were, policed.

Clearly, then, while we must treat pauper narratives with caution, it is possible to overblow the problems in their usage. In the rest of this article we will therefore analyse the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the rhetoric of community, belonging, neighbourhood, friendship and kinship in the letters of paupers sent back to their Northamptonshire parishes of settlement. While Northamptonshire itself was not highly urbanised, it has the advantage of possessing one of the best pauper letter collections in England, pauper letters that encompass residents writing from across the urban piece from London and Birmingham to much smaller, barely urban, communities such as Wisbech, and which afford a large sample of letters between rural communities for comparison purposes. In total we have 842 letters in the underlying sample, of which 66% came from places that were, following Clark (2000), recognizably urban and the remainder from places that were properly rural. The *recipient* communities ranged across larger urban areas such as Northampton or Peterborough, to small hamlets such as Rothersthorpe. In other words, the sample encompasses a microcosm of the English urban landscape. (Clark and Lepetit 1996; Stobart 2005; Lees and Lees 2007). Figure 1 in the appendix provides a UK county map to set the letters and the communities in proper spatial context.

[7] Leicestershire Record Office, DE/1587/154/24, 25th February 1823. My italics here and subsequently.

3. Narratives of Belonging: Neighbourhood, Friendship and Community

Non-resident paupers trying to establish their entitlement to poor relief had to cope with (and use in a rhetorical sense) potentially competing or complementary understandings of the notion of belonging. Paupers in a legal and moral sense belonged to their parish of settlement, and an associated rhetoric of belonging to the settlement parish is common in many pauper letters irrespective of the life-cycle stage of the writer or the socio-economic complexion of the community in which they were resident.[8] Thus, Anthony South used positive images of belonging to his settlement parish, confirming Snell's view (1992) that settlement was like a currency. He wrote to Peterborough (Northamptonshire) from Brighton (Sussex) on 5 December 1833, and his letter is worth quoting at length because it suggests key search terms for more systematic analysis. He noted that

> It was my intention to have address a letter to you for some time past, but *I was averse to give you trouble* while I had hopes of it being unnecessary – Now however I am sorry to say it becomes an imperious duty, as my wife, who has long been in a declining state but whose recovery, till now, I had flattered myself would have taken place, is so much worse that my hopes and expectation, and those of the doctor who attends her, are almost at an end. In this situation I am under the necessity of applying to *my parish*, without which I am unable to support myself and her and a helpless child. I am the son of Anthony South who served his apprenticeship with Dr Spalding and *Mr White know my father well – I was myself at home six years ago last July*, but never received any parish relief except about a fortnight of that time. I think it necessary to mention these circumstances in the first place that you may have an opportunity of informing me, *whether I may expect relief from my own parish*, or put myself on the parish of Brighton, which I shall be under the necessity of doing unless you are free to allow me something for my own. My wife is at present in that state that she is totally unable to do anything for herself or her family, and indeed we have been compelled for some time past to keep a girl to attend her, at an expense which I can no longer support. In the hopes of being forward with your Reply in acquiescence with my very untoward situation I remain Respectfully sir your mo. obe.[sic] servant.[9]

South in other words had a well-developed sense and rhetoric of his belonging to a settlement parish, laying down markers of his last visit to the place, stressing his long term connection with Peterborough as an individual, and knowledge of his family by prominent people in the locality (the recipient, Mr. White, had previously been an overseer). These themes were revisited in a more direct letter of 24 December 1833, when

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[8] Though, as James Stephen Taylor (1989) points out, the question of settlement could become very vexed for second as opposed to first generation migrants.

[9] Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO) 261P Vii/Bundle 244/7.

> I had occasion about three weeks ago, to address a letter to the overseer of Cowgate Parish stating the state of my wife's health for a long time, and the impossibility of my being able to procure the requisites which her situation demands and at the same time to maintain and pay a person who necessarily attends her without some relief from *my parish*. This letter was accompanied by a PS from the Doctor who attends her, a man of great respectability, corroborating my statement, but not withstanding this I have never received any reply to my letter which surprises me very much. *I did not however know when I wrote that you are at present acting as head overseer of that Parish, otherwise would have addressed the letter to you as being well acquainted with my father and which you told me when I was last at Peterboro* about six years ago. May I therefore request your kind attention to the contents of my letters soon as possible, as otherwise I shall be under the necessity of putting myself on the Parish of Brighton or ordered to be *removed home* whenever my wife's state of health my admit of it but when this may be the case it is impossible to tell, as she has been for some months in nearly the same state tho' apparently every day declining in strength.[10]

Here, then, South employed a common tactic in negotiating with overseers, stressing his intimate connection with the person serving office as well as with the parish itself. He also pointed once again to his sense of self-connection with 'his' parish.

Other Peterborough letters also point forcibly to an enduring sense of place and belonging to settlement parish. James Tomblin wrote from the town of Thrapston (Northamptonshire) to a magistrate in Peterborough (Cambridgeshire) on 25 October 1823 to say that

> As you are a magistrate of the city of Peterborough *of which place I am a native* and *to which place I belong* I take the liberty of troubling you which I hope you will excuse. *My circumstances are well known to many of the inhabitants of Peterborough*, having had for a long time a series of domestic affliction the latest and most considerable of which is that my wife has been very ill for nearly twelve months and is still unwell which together with former afflictions has incurred a doctors bill of more than £12. In consequence of the extra expense unavoidable during this affliction I have not been able to pay the last year's rent £2 16 under these circumstances and with no other means than the produce of my labour I am totally unable to meet these expenses, and must if not assisted in some degree *come home* to Peterboro. If assisted to pay the rent I will endeavour to discharge the other accounts as far as I can which I hope will not be refused. *I applied to the overseers personally* a few weeks ago and went away under the hope that something would be done for me as I was not positively refused but promised that my case should be considered and an answer sent. I have received no answer – and to come again to Peterborough involves a loss of time and some expense. I have therefore ventured to apply to you.[11]

[10] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 244/21.
[11] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 244/40

This letter was in effect a legal challenge to the overseers and may, as Peter King (2004) found for other places, have compromised his perceived rights in the parish. However, the important point is that Tomblin used multi-layered rhetorics of attachment to his settlement parish, emphasising not just his belonging but also his nativity (that is, he had not simply gained a settlement there, which ought to weigh on the mind of the magistrate). He noted that his circumstances were well known not just to the overseer but many of the inhabitants of Peterborough (implying an ongoing informational dialogue with the home parish), and he emphasised that he had renewed this connection by appearing in person before local officials to make his case. In other words, he had rights and his parish of belonging had analogous duties.

We can form a more systematic understanding of the importance of the language of belonging to a settlement parish in Northamptonshire pauper narratives using NVIVO. Assembling a suite of keywords and phrases linked to generalised or personalised concepts of belonging to a place of settlement ('my parish', 'home', 'come/coming/removed home', 'place I belong', 'native', 'known', 'coming down', 'when I was up' etc.[12]) and deploying them individually and in linked strings reveals several key observations that contextualise the rest of this article: Firstly, 56% of all narratives deploy some signifiers of belonging to a settlement parish in their engagement with the overseer. Moreover, if we control for letters where the situational context made it unlikely or even impossible that signifiers of belonging would be used (for instance where a pauper was writing to acknowledge receipt of relief or where paupers were responding to a definite set of questions posed by the overseer) then some 69% of all letters that could carry signifiers of belonging to a settlement parish did so. A second observation is that of the 544 individual letters thus identified, 71% deployed more than one linguistic signifier of belonging. Those who wrote multiple pauper letters (more than two) used more signifiers, a greater range of signifiers and more complex signifiers of belonging over their letter series as a whole, than did those who wrote only one or two narratives. Indeed, all multiple letter writers would use the language of belonging to a settlement parish in this sample at some point in their multiple writing. Moreover, there was a distinct tendency for all multiple letter writers to use signifiers of belonging to their settlement parish towards the early and mid-range of their letter series, rather than in its later stages, suggesting that emphasising belonging to settlement parish may have been simultaneously at the forefront of their consciousness and negotiating strategy. Thirdly, in terms of the physical positioning of signifiers, it is clear from the analysis that both multiple and single letter

[12] The search list included 49 phrases or keywords drawn from a general appreciation of the language of pauper letters supplemented by contemporary linguistic nuances of belonging drawn variously from Snell (2006); Bushaway (2002); Crowther/ Crowther (1997); Vaisey (1984); Cooper (1984).

writers tended strongly towards opening or closing the narratives with the language of belonging to a settlement parish. In part this reflects a commonly understood template for the ways in which to structure letters (Brant 2006; MacArthur 1990;Berg 2006), but since even those letters with the most basic orthographic spelling employed the same positioning it probably reflected an intended emphasis on the importance of that sense of belonging when negotiating with officials. Finally, the rhetoric of belonging to a home parish was not, as suggested above, unique to paupers writing from or to urban areas. Indeed, if anything paupers resident in small rural communities were much more likely to focus on their connections to officials, kin and residents in their parish of settlement. Witness, for instance, Joseph Richards, who wrote back to the Northamptonshire town of Thrapston from Catworth in Hertfordshire on 13 June 1825, and addressed the overseer as 'My dear friend'[13], or James Mills, who wrote back to Rothersthorpe (Northamptonshire) from Waddington in Worcestershire to ask for relief on 18 July 1821 addressing the overseer thus

> I am but a leaf on the wind and you dear friend, so generous and understanding to me in past indeavours, are my stake. Please to offer my love to my friends and old neighbous in the place, and be assured that I shall not call on you further but be back to you soon.[14]

The opposite side of the coin, however, is that paupers writing from rural areas tended to emphasise much less their rootedness in the host community. Indeed, analysing the narratives using NVIVO reveals three quite distinct rhetorical devices used by urban paupers to emphasise their general and specific belonging.[15]

The first device (and one particularly prevalent amongst those with children and the aged residents of urban areas, with 63% of the latter group using this device) was to temper the rhetoric of belonging to the parish of settlement with positive sentiments or inferences about the general ways in which the pauper was cemented into their community of residence. Thus, Joseph Yates, resident in Huntingdon (Huntingdonshire) at the time of his writing on 12 September 1799 but settled in Peterborough (Northamptonshire), wrote to

> aquaint you that Mr Rob.t Shaw the Overseer of the Poor of the Parish of St John Huntingdon intends to remove me & my Family to *your* parish being *the place I belong* to unless you will be so kind as to defray the Expences of my daughter's funeral as Died last May – the Expenses are about 37/- it is out of my power to pay it I don't wish to be any further charge to *your parish* …

[13] NRO, 325P/193/73.

[14] These records were consulted in 1994 at Rothersthorpe Parish Church, where they were in the Parish Chest.

[15] As well as the analyses reported here, the narrative sample was swept for variations in the use and nature of signifiers over time, according to gender, size of urban community and (in so far as it could be assessed) health status. No significant differences were found.

Hope you will be so obliging to pay it as I may keep where I am *I can't get my bread if I come to Peterboro*[16]

Yates, then, used both passive and active rhetoric of belonging. On the one hand he referred in a passive way to his belonging to Peterborough but without the real conviction that we see of other, particularly rural, paupers in the south and midlands, which would have required him to have talked about 'my' rather than 'your' parish. On the other hand, and much more representative of urban paupers in particular, he suggested that he was actively cemented into an economic community in Huntingdon, where he could get his bread. For aged paupers such rootedness was given more substance through reference to their generalised standing in the host community. Thus, on 30 January 1826, Thomas Adams wrote to the overseer of Thrapston from Mildenhall in Norfolk 'On behalf of Thomas Drage, a man living here and belongs to your parish, I solicit your assistance as he is a most deserving character and *much respected here* but from age and bad health (a paraletik stroke) he is unable to support himself without a trifle assistance *I believe he would do any thing rather than come to Thrapston*'.[17] In this instance, Adams could have used the phrase 'come home' (common usage by rural paupers or those writing on their behalf) but instead emphasized the rootedness of the couple and enhanced his assessment of their standing by naming the town of Thrapston, in effect labeling it as 'other'. Systematic analysis of the whole narrative sample reveals that phrases such as 'lived here the grater part of their/our lives'; 'I/we are known/can get credit/work here', 'belong to this place', or 'wish to stay in our home', along with a stock of phrases emphasising that paupers could draw on a richer economy of makeshift in their place of residence, were much more likely to be used in urban pauper narratives or letters written on behalf of the urban poor. Moreover, some 90% of the instances in which such phrases were used multiple times in the same letter were to be found in urban narratives, significantly ahead of the importance of urban narratives in the sample as a whole.

How to read this aspect and rhetoric of belonging is complex. It could simply reflect the fact that the urban poor had a different suite of resources to draw upon in order to construct their identity – larger neighbourhoods, stronger and more diversified town economies, deeper makeshift economies that allowed the aged to remain independent longer, etc. Alternatively, and the reading preferred here, the distinctive tendency for urban pauper to emphasize their rootedness in host communities might reflect, as in the pottery towns analysed by Jon Stobart (2003), a genuinely different set of expectations and experiences. These are issues to which we return below.

Meanwhile, a second device, and one particularly prevalent in letters written by or on behalf of those that we can infer to have had large families or to have

[16] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 242/9.
[17] NRO, 325P/193/114.

met with life-cycle crisis such as widowhood, was to emphasize the positive benefits of the paupers living in their host community, but to stress in negotiating for relief the essential fragility of that belonging. Thus William Howarth, the vicar of the growing market town of March in Cambridgeshire wrote to the overseer of Peterborough on 15 April 1833 to bring to his attention the

> family of Joseph Clark (now residing in this place though *belonging to your parish*) to whose case I beg most earnestly and respectfully to call your attention He is himself very ill and totally unable to work, and his wife has for some time been confined to her bed with inflamation on her lungs, and the medical gentleman who is kindly attending them thinks the womans life in great danger. I found them and their four children without food, money, or a nurse and altogether in a most distressed and folorn condition The master for who Clark has worked gives him and excellent character for steadiness and industry, but *not belonging to our parish he has been unable during the winter to obtain any work*, except an occasional job.[18]

This is an intriguing letter, at once pointing to the fact that Joseph Clark had a local character, he was cemented into local employment networks, and that he and his wife were well enough regarded for a doctor to treat the couple for free (that is *kindly*). They were also and clearly firmly cemented into a religious community given that the vicar wrote on their behalf, and did so on no less than four occasions. In other words, they belonged. However, there is another side to this letter, since because Clark did not 'belong to our parish' he had been underemployed or unemployed, suggesting either that local employers prioritised jobs for the settled poor or that the parish authorities had some sort of allowance or labour market intervention mechanism that equally prioritised the settled poor (Patriquin 2007). The Clark's were, in other words, both insiders and outsiders.[19]

We find an even starker expression of fragile belonging to a host community in the multiple writings of William Bateman, settled in Thrapston but resident in Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk. By way of example, his letter of 20 March 1826 said,

> It is with painful feelings I have to address you upon this subject after I got to Bury [St Edmunds] my wife was confined about 14 days after and the House being intirely New Birth it has taken a great deal of caoles as we were obliged to keep good fires the weather being cold after my wife got about two of my children were taken ill and kept their beds some weeks a Nurse and a Doctor I was obliged to have and *Trade being dull the situation a new one and myself a stranger to Bury* it is brought me very low in circumstances my rent being due on 25 March and other bills to pay which I am not Able to meet I am under the Necessity of asking *Thrapston Parish* for assistance and you being the overseer I address myself to you – Therefore must beg of you to show my case

[18] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 244/3.
[19] On the integration mechanisms for in-migrants to English towns, see Williamson (1990).

> to the Gentlemen and unless they will render me some Assistance I shall be Obliged to sell all I have and my wife and Family *must come home* to Thrapston *where I belong as I lived there 4 years and 4 months* and what the Gentlemen think will do for me will be Thankfully received … you see what I have suffered I have had a bad beginning but I hope I shall [have] a better ending my Trade begins to increase there is 13 Houses built Joining mine and 8 more going to be built 13 will be occupied by the 25 of this month and hope by what I shall be able to do in my Gingerbread Trade and confectionary in the Town and the Buildings around me *I shall be able to get a living*.[20]

Bateman thus talked positively about his connection to Thrapston (his home, a place of long residence and a place of legal belonging) but the rhetorical heart of this letter was a positive assessment of his long term independence in Bury associated with the development of the urban fabric. However, in the short term he faced trouble, not simply because his wife had been confined but because he was a stranger to the town. He had not yet generated the sense and public persona of belonging that a successful business selling gingerbread would bring. A little relief in this situation would, he assured the overseer, not lead to long term dependence but the creation of a secure place of belonging for the family. In turn, systematic consideration of narrative sample as a whole using NVIVO reveals that words and phrases suggesting fragility of belonging – being a relative stranger in a place, being disadvantaged in the labour market by not having a settlement in a place, being unable to raise credit because poor economic conditions meant shopkeepers privileged the settled poor etc – were strongly and disproportionately concentrated in urban narratives.

A third device was (and irrespective of the period that a pauper had resided in an urban host community) to largely ignore the language of belonging to a settlement parish and instead to positively emphasise the specific benefits of friendship, neighbourhood or community, either in extending the time between destitution and the need to apply to the home parish or in promising that the paupers concerned would not be long term dependents. Some 85% of letters containing phraseology of this type came from urban residents, running right across the spectrum of age and life-cycle circumstances.[21] Thus, Jonathan Roberts wrote from Nottingham to Rothershorpe (Northamptonshire) on 12 April 1818 asking for relief during his continuing sickness and payment of a doctor's bill. He noted

> I must have quit this place *was it not for mye goode freynds and neibours* who ave elped thos old man of near 80 yrs of age and not done nothing but goode for him and they have sent thar children with fireing and given me such food and clotheing as was fit for a Prince and I Pray Gentlmen that you will be so

[20] NRO, 325P/193/132.

[21] Surprisingly, there was no obvious tendency for this aspect of belonging to be emphasized more in larger rather than smaller urban areas or in old towns rather than newer towns.

> king and generus to help mee bee fitte again and I have *no dubte that but my neibours will be willinge to put thare backs once more into my care*.[22]

Roberts, then, did not just belong in name. He could evidence and promise very considerable support from his host community. We rarely see this sort of expression in letters from rural areas.

Nor was Roberts alone. Susan Waddington wrote to Peterborough from Wisbech (Cambridgeshire) on 23 November 1833 to say that

> Mr Mills *which is our acting Overseer* of Wisbeach he told me that he was not going to pay me any more after that day and that I must get you to *send it to some other friend here*. Mr Chapman which is Mrs Peels father is so kind as to say if you gentlemen would be so good as to send it to him *he would take care that I should have it as I live at the farthest end of the town* I hoped you gentlemen would put me on a trifle more a week as I am so dreadfully afflicted with the Rheumatism on my hands shall be so much obliged to you to let me have it as often as convenient as I have but that to live on if you would have the goodness to let it be given to Davis Mr Simmons man that comes with the packet he will give it to Mrs Chapman safe.[23]

Waddington thus delivered a sophisticated rendering of her belonging, at once emphasizing her continuing connection with and knowledge of events in Peterborough (Mr Simmons sending a man to Wisbech regularly) and Wisbech (knowing that Mills was only acting overseer, something that mattered) but balancing this with her firm connections within her town of residence, able to turn at need to female friends who could find an alternative payment mechanism for her and who would be willing to look after her interests given that she lived at the farthest extremities of the town. Her friends would, in other words, be willing to put themselves out for her. Similarly, William Cook wrote from Kettering (Northamptonshire) to Thrapston on 29 August 1824 in the case of George May who needed relief

> Owing to the severe and long illness of his wife She has been confined to her bed for this last six weeks and has scarcely had one days health for this year past so the poor man is obliged to have a woman constantly with her and he being so disturbed at nights almost disables him from work beg to say he is a very steady man and feels very great reluctance in applying to you but great distress is the cause, since his wifes illness *he has met with many kind friends or he would have been in a very deplorable situation*.[24]

May himself took up his pen on 18 August 1825, asking 'If you think it advisable for me and the children to come home we are willing so to do if I do not get better soon because we should then be where we belong and if I should be taken away the poor children would then have some kind friend to take care of them'. In short, May emphasized his belonging to his settlement community

[22] Rothersthorpe Parish Church, uncatalogued.
[23] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 244/22.
[24] NRO, 325P/193/12.

and set out a structure of expectations about what that place of belonging would do for his children should he die. Nonetheless, he added forceful evidence of his belonging to Kettering, suggesting that 'if you wish I can have the names of several respectable inhabitants of Ketterng but they said they thought not necessary'.[25] He resumed on 28 August 1825, asking for more relief because

> I have been under the Doctors hands 5 weeks this summer and *I am forced to go into trust for every thing* the woman charged me 4/ for washing my bed and I have got to pay the woman for attending of us when we was so very bad and how I shall get through them all I do not no. If I get better I must sell my few things to pay some of them because I have been so long bad. Sir, I return you my grateful thanks for your kindness and I will make it go as far as I can Sir I shall go to bed in better spirits to Night than I have done for this long time past … *My master wants me to go to work very bad and I will as soon as possible* can if I get better.[26]

May had been able to draw upon credit networks, almost a unique motif in the letters of urban versus rural paupers and a definitive sign of status and belonging to a place since in English credit networks local reputation was everything (Muldrew 1998; Finn 2003; Smail 2005). His standing was fragile. He must repay his debts to maintain his position in the community. Nonetheless, he could look forward to returning to employment with a local master who was eager to employ him again, de facto evidence of a real rootedness in the host community. May, in other words, was entirely cemented into the developing urban fabric of Kettering.

We might make the same point about Richard Richards and his wife, resident in Stafford but settled in Thrapston, on whom the overseer of Stafford (Staffordshire) reflected on 10 April 1827 that 'The poor old man has been ill and incapable of working all the winter was it not for the *human benevolence of neighbours they could not remain here*'.[27] Moreover, and largely unique to urban areas in the underlying sample, neighbours and friends might take up negotiations directly on behalf of aged or sick paupers in particular, as, for instance, when Elizabeth Foxal wrote from Birmingham to Thrapston on 26 January 1826 on behalf of

> William Worlidge [who] is now very ill indeed and has been for some time and gets worse every day the one pound note you was so good as to send him is quite spent with the greatest care and he is *left without a penny* of money … poor old man, in his 74th year and so ill *I am shock'd to see him* but from your kind attention to my husbands letter he wrote to you concerning him I am not afraid but you will attend to this, my husband is from home or he would have wrote instead of me. He is something in dept [debt] for lodgings and will be

[25] NRO, 325P/193/86.
[26] NRO, 325P/193/91.
[27] NRO, 325P/194/61.

> glad of immediate relief for *he wants a many comfort and is destitute of every necessary of life* he has a complication of disorders a strong asma on his lungs and a gravel complaint and the piles severely poor creature *I am sorry to see him* I hope you will be good enough to send him immediate relief.[28]

While it is possible to over-read such letters, it would have been difficult for an overseer to ignore this strong rendering of the state of William Worlidge, the more so since it came from a neighbour with clear and ongoing interests in the welfare of the old man, a clear indicator or rootedness and belonging.

Of course, this discussion is a simplification of some of the complexities in the underlying narrative sample. While the different uses of the rhetoric and symbolism of belonging to a host community are here portrayed as discrete, in practice it was perfectly possible for a pauper to use multiple reference points from all three strategies in a single letter. Such, for instance, was the tactic of Mary Gunnell, writing from Manchester to the Northamptonshire village of Oxendon on 22 January 1834 to report the death of her husband because

> About a fortnight ago my late husband wrote to you stating his and our Situation saying that he expected it would be his last time of troubling you which has been the case he Departed this transitory life on last Monday morning but one. We have not as yet received your answer I therefore write to inform you that *I am left in a very precarious Situation* as our *Landlady has taken part of our Goods* and I am *in other Cases much embarrassed* and in Respect to myself I am very Poorly in health and the worst is the loss of sight. I have long lost the sight of one Eye totally and have a Pearl far advancing upon the other. You will consider I am not able to provide for myself. *Daughter Elizabeth is still at home but it is not in her power to support me but is willing to do her utmost if you will assist her* I therefore hope you will have the Goodness to take our Situation into consideration and favour me with an immediate Answer as I must have assistance from some Quarter and *would much rather have it from you than to have the trouble of applying to this town which you are confident I must Do if you do not prevent it by doing it yourselves*. I hope I have *sufficiently explained my situation* and shall patiently wait for a few days or a Week for your (I hope favourable) Answer.[29]

Set against the backdrop of death and her own ill health, Gunnell suggested that her belonging to Manchester was fragile (she was embarrassed because she had borrowed and could not pay her debts, her situation was precarious and her landlady was threatening) and that she had a genuine call on the resources of her settlement parish ('I *must* have assistance'). Nonetheless, she had been resident in Manchester for some time and implied that relief would be forthcoming from the overseers there if she applied for it. However, she did not wish to be a burden, and with the help of her daughter, who also rooted her in

[28] NRO, 325P/193/112.
[29] NRO 251P/98.

the urban environment, would be able to make do if her settlement parish would but grant a small allowance.

Meanwhile, if Gunnell is a good example of the deployment of multiple rhetorics of belonging in a single letter, it is also clear that multiple letter writers could vacillate between the strategies depending upon their exact circumstances, the overseer they were writing to, their changing life-cycle stage or their residential mobility within communities. And while we have implied that pauper's belonging to a place and being visible in it was a positive feature in their negotiation of entitlement with the overseer[30], this was not always the case. On 24 July 1821, the overseer of Oxendon received the following letter from Thomas Derwin in Leicester:

> I think it duty incumbent on me to Inform you of the conduct of a man named James Harmstead & his wife who I am told receives Parochial weekly Pay from yr Parish while at the same time they are living in Drunkenness, Riot & Debauchery to the great annoyance of the Neighbours. Hampstead [sic] is a stocking maker works for Josh Bec Wharf St, Bec pays him 9s & sometimes 10s pr week for his work in addition to which the wretched pair keeps a public Bawdy house in Barkby Lane in this Town it is also a Rendezvous for men of Bad character at all hours of the Night, and at present they have 5 Lewd women in the House. The above is a statement of facts that can be proved by the neighbours if required – I appeal to you as Parish officers expecting that you will investigate that matter before you pay any more Money to such undeserving People.[31]

Being visible and belonging sometimes also connotated norms of behaviour, breaches of which could undermine the status of a pauper resident outside their settlement community.

Yet, notwithstanding these complexities, systematic analysis of the underlying narrative sample reveals that the linguistic motif of belonging to a host parish and its evidential symbolism were disproportionately concentrated in letters written from urban areas. Such urban paupers were more likely to use phrases or keywords denoting belonging, to use them multiple times in the same letter and (as we saw with Mary Gunnell above) to combine them in more complex forms than their rural counterparts.

4. Family and Kinship Communities

A further (perhaps the most) distinctive rhetoric in letters from or about urban paupers centres round the issue of family/kinship and belonging, something

[30] It is certainly true that letters deploying the rhetoric and symbolism of belonging to both host and settlement parish were more likely to be successful in garnering parish resources than those that used no such rhetoric and symbolism once we control for life-cycle stage and health.

[31] NRO 251P/100.

that we see hinted at in the letter of Mary Gunnell. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a crude statistical sense (higher population densities and relatively segmented urban spatial landscapes mean narrower odds of having kin proximately resident) almost all references to kinship in the narrative sample that underpins this analysis come from paupers in urban areas. Yet, if the observation is at one level unsurprising and fits well with a literature that has often seen urban kinship as a key reason for migration and method for integration (Kertzer 2002; Pooley and De cruz 1994; Pooley and Whyte 1991), at another level we understand little about how kinship functioned at times of poverty and about how the rhetoric of kinship intersected with that of belonging in order to establish entitlement for urban paupers.

Against this backdrop, systematic analysis of direct (brother, sister, son, daughter, family, kin etc.) and indirect (household, someone/no one to come charge, give assistance etc.) references to kinship in urban narratives highlights both negative (lack of kin or inability of proximate kin to support the pauper) and positive (kinship support had been/is being/will be offered) frameworks of reference. In a negative sense, David Clarke, encountered above, wrote from his host community of Norwich (Norfolk) to Peterborough on 18 February 1801 to say that

> I am sorry the distress of the times forces me to implore your immediate assistance I need not point out the dearness of articles of life flattering myself I write to gentlemen well aquainted with every circumstance of the kind and whome I trust are Gentlemen Ridy to redress *your porre parishoners* real distresses haveing laboured under depravity of site for several years and my wife under a very bad state of health and now [obscured by seal] this time being bad In this Distrest situation I am force contrary to my wishes to ask your relief being quite unable to get through life *I have no family that can come charge* to you but hour selves but the frequent whant of work and the state of health we now labour under forcess *your perishoners* than to address you.[32]

Having no local family, the Clarke's fell back on the passive sense of belonging that we have already traced above, referring not to 'my' parish but to their status as 'your parishoners'. Yet, the fact that Clarke saw fit to mention kinship in the first place, even negatively, suggests that it was an important variable that the overseers might otherwise ask about.[33] Of the 556 letters in the

[32] NRO, 261P Vii/Bundle 242/17

[33] The 'law' of the Old Poor Law clearly established that where they were able, certain categories of kin were obliged to provide care (financial, space etc) to poor relatives. While most commentators suggest that this law was rarely enforced, comments such as that of Clarke above could provide testimony to an awareness of the letter of the law and a desire to pre-empt further enquiries by the overseer. We should also note that kinship was an important issue in terms of settlement law, since it was possible to 'derive' a new settlement through acts such as marriage. There might, in other words, be a wider pauper awareness of whether and how to talk about kin. This said the same observation would apply to rural and urban paupers and the fact that kinship references were heavily concentrated in urban narra-

Northamptonshire sample that relate to urban areas, 206 carry some allusion to kinship, with 103 falling into this negative referencing category. Such letters were usually accompanied by stress on the pauper belonging to a settlement parish, though with a significant minority also carrying reference to rootedness in host communities.

For other paupers, particularly the life-cycle/occupational groups for whom weaving a story of belonging to an urban host community, neighbourhood or friendship network was particularly problematic, positive allusions to kinship gave the sense of rootedness and was an important rhetorical tool in negotiating entitlement. The young migrant, particularly where the problem of youth was associated with other conditions such as an illegitimate child, was notably hard-pressed to make a generalised and evidenced case for belonging. Thus, Elizabeth Simmons wrote back from her residence at Portman Square in London to her settlement parish of Peterborough on 2 May 1799, to say that 'I hope no offense for takeing the liberty of writeing to you about my Poor Childe But *my place* will not keep it and me I am sorry to trouble you sir I trust you will be so good *if you are not in offes now to speak for me* as I am But a Poor servant'. Unlike her older counterparts, who often went to considerable lengths to keep in touch with the turnover of officials in their settlement place, Simmons had little idea of who was serving as overseer. She was clearly appealing to the person in post when she left Peterborough. Noting the poor health of her (illegitimate) daughter, she pleaded 'I am sorry to tell you I now paid my last quarter wages for the Docter threw there in the child ill health and the rest for the keep of the child as *I have no assistants for us boath* els I wuold not trouble you'. Simmons, then, was not cemented into local community structures, and 'I am going out of town with my Mrs [her employer] in a very few days it will be a sad thing for me to loos my place if that is not settle'; her community, in other words, was the family she served. However, in this case, an alternative vision of community, the kinship community, was deployed. Scribbled in the margins of the letter was a note: '*My sister cannot afford to keep it* without the pay'.[34] A letter of 3 December 1799 from the London (St George's Parish) overseers followed up this story, suggesting that 'through the dearness of provisions in this neighbourhood the persons who now keep E Simmons child (belonging to your parish) cannot any longer support it for 2/- a week, but will do their endeavour with the advancement of 6d per week additional'.[35] While there was no mention of Simmons's sister providing the care, the implication of kinship support is clear.

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tives thus suggests that kinship was genuinely a more important variable in urban areas and in the conceptions of urban paupers about how best they might establish entitlement.

[34] NRO, 261P Vii/ Bundle 242/1.

[35] NRO, 261P Vii/ Bundle 242/42.

Kinship was also an important positive anchor to the aged Joseph Richards. Writing from Warwick (Warwickshire) to Thrapston on 6 August 1826, he noted that

> I ham now so infirm that I am not able to spend 1 penny towards my support and my wife is very ill and we are almost lost *was it not for some of our children that have been kind to us we must have come wolly [wholly] to you before now* therefore I hope you Honourable Gentlemen will consider our Destress and allow us a little more pay as it is Impossible for to do with out any longer if not *I must come Home to you* and If I am found to come I hope you will have me searched and then you will be able to Judge weather I am able to do – any thing for myself as I am Object of Pity therefore send immediately *or you must take me and keep me as I don't cannot do any longer* and I expect a Distress for Longe they will force me to pay them as *I do not belong this Parish* or they would not make me Pay them To Inform you I sent a Letter a few days ago and we have not had an answer back but if you do not send Immediately *the Parish must bring me home* as I am past coming myself and W Gibbart is not willing to do any thing in it of his own head till I hear from you *my Daughters can now scarcely maintain themselves without keeping me* I wish you would when you send look the Register and send my Age and the Complaint that is on me will get me off from paying Leys tho in this Parish. I remain your Humble Servt.[36]

Richards, then, used multiple rhetorics of belonging, at once highlighting the fact that he belonged to Thrapston and his otherness in Warwick (an otherness which had resulted in his being classified for the poor rates in a way that would not be the case for a settled pauper) but mediating this oppositional rhetoric with the implication that he could 'do for himself' better in Warwick than he could in Thrapston, and mentioning his proximately resident daughter(s) whose support tied him into the host community. A small allowance to an honest man would keep him rooted and, with the supplement of kinship support, remove his dependence. Interestingly, both of Richards' brothers, Joseph (living in Coventry, Warwickshire) and William (living in Stafford) were also dependent upon co- or proximately resident daughters to retain their independence and residence in their host communities.

Sometimes the support went in the opposite direction. Elizabeth King wrote from Ely (Cambridgeshire) to Thrapston on 26 April 1825 to note

> Gentlemen, Some little time ago I wrote to you to inform you of my situation I really cannot go on at all not being able to support myself and child. I therefore must request the favour of you sending some relief otherwise *I shall be obliged to come home*. I cannot walk over myself or I certainly should have come before this but if I do not receive any answer from this I will get my mother to come, *my father and mother have done for me till they cannot do any longer* so that I cannot do without some assistance.[37]

[36] NRO, 325P/194/15.
[37] NRO, 325P/193/65.

Like other urban (and rural) paupers, King stressed her belonging to the settlement parish, but her mother and father were a primary anchor in Ely and while she threatened to come 'home' as a negotiating ploy her rootedness in Ely is clear in the letter.

More widely, use of NVIVO reveals that those letters employing the language and substance of kinship were also generally those that contained the most numerous and complex references to belonging to either host or settlement parish. One particularly good example is of Margaret Walcott, settled in Rothersthorpe but resident in Birmingham. Her first letter of 23 January 1819 noted,

> I am nought but a poor old woman and my husband can do so little, please to send relief, a trifle will do, in our current illness and be assured that *we have done all in our means to get by without applying to our parish*, but our credit is done and we have small depts that must be paid and *our friends can do no more having kept us for these years*, and all of this for us aged 80 years or more I cannot tell you, But I must relate another circumstance, which is that *our son and dr has been of so much help to us otherwise we must have come home before this*, and You Know that they themselves has been of no mean need. Please to send to Mr Swan at the Bull, *for he is a friend*, and perhaps a trifle for my daughter who is sick and with us.[38]

This is a rhetorically complex letter, mixing up many of the themes already encountered in this article, including the sense of belonging to both settlement and host parishes, the rootedness of the old couple in their community (a community, incidentally in which they had lived for only the last three years) and the presence of proximate and co-residential kin whose impact has explicitly been to anchor the old couple. Walcott wrote again on 13 May 1820 to request

> Some necessary relief, for my husband is near 80 years of age and cannot get the work for our daily bread, and me caring for my daughter and her child while her worthless husband wanders about in the town without a penny for her support, and *ware it not for our daughters, who you must be perswaded are so much for our support and for keeping us from coming home*. I most earnestly beg you to help us, for our daughters do no justice to themselves and little to their children by having to look after such as us, and if *I am perswaded that many other in the neibourhood depend thus upon their children, I wish that we were no burthen on them or on our parish.* A trifle will suffice.[39]

Once again, while unemployment and old age were the reason for writing, the claims-making mechanism and the rhetorical infrastructure was centred around multiple concepts of belonging and around the anchor of kinship. The themes continued in several other letters until she wrote again on 28 June 1824 to report

[38] Rothersthorpe Parish Church, uncatalogued.
[39] Rothersthorpe Parish Church, uncatalogued.

> My husband has died this week gone and *I am forsed to deny our little depts which does us no credit here*, and nothing for the doctor except *our friends and neighbours have helped* and with the burial too. Gentlemen, I do not wish to be a burthen on *my daughter and my son now arrived here*, but would keep my own place, and *my friends and neightbours are willing to shift some*, but please to send relief to a poor old woman. I will no that you have others clamaring for relief at this time, for *John Stead comes regular to the Bull here*, but I must be allowed to advance my claims, for *my life is here and my family aeround me* and think how much it would be in money and tears for to bring me *home*. Consider genetlemen, how many of your poor are in this place and what advantage to you to have them with their kin, and *consider too that it will be a scandal here if you do not* act.[40]

Walcott portrayed her rootedness in the community as both strong (neighbours and friends offered help and they would think it a scandal if the poor law did not help) and weak (she was forced to deny debts, which hit her standing in the community) but at the heart of her appeal was the idea that she was cemented into a local kinship network.

For urban paupers, then, kinship was at once part of the mechanism by which belonging was created and a rhetorical vehicle for establishing entitlement in place of residence. This is not to say that all urban paupers had dense kinship networks, that such networks were functional or that they chose to talk about them. Nor is this to say that kinship was uniformly important across the life-cycle, since it is clear from the NVIVO analysis of all narratives that kinship was a particularly important part of urban living and rootendness for the aged poor. However, it is true that much of the most sophisticated material on kinship in pauper letters comes from paupers living in recognisably urban communities.[41]

5. Conclusion: Unbundling Rhetoric and Reality

While some of the most recent literature on the early decades of the Old Poor Law has sought to downplay the scope for pauper agency, suggesting that paupers were caught in a web of power which still demanded deference, submissive rhetoric and gratitude (Hindle 2004a), the tone, scope and rhetorical scaffolding of pauper letters signifies that by the 'crisis' of the Old Poor Law some two hundred years later attitudes had shifted decisively. Paupers in this sample used sophisticated rhetorical and strategic claims-making apparatus to establish their deservingness but also to reflect their organic sense of belong-

[40] Rothersthorpe Parish Church, uncatalogued.

[41] It is impossible to control in this observation for the possibility that the newly dependent poor in urban areas could draw on a greater pool of shared knowledge about what worked and what did not when it came to establishing entitlement. In this sense, how and whether urban paupers wrote about kin could reflect greater access to communal knowledge.

ing. Those paupers who ended up in urban areas shared some of the rhetoric of their rural counterparts, particularly when it came to expressing their sense of belonging to the parish of settlement. However, these paupers also employed distinctive motifs, tempering their rhetoric of belonging to the parish of settlement with positive sentiments or implications about the general ways in which the pauper was cemented into their parish of residence, stressing the essential fragility of that rootedness and talking in positive and expansive terms about the specific benefits of friendship, neighbourhood or community. Above all, urban pauper tended to talk much more about kinship (in either a positive or negative sense) than their rural counterparts. The latter observation remains true even where we know that rural paupers have proximately resident kin. Some life-cycle groups were likely to emphasise one aspect of belonging above others, but we can nonetheless see a range of distinctive urban motifs. What all of this adds up to, at least for the out-parish poor of other parishes living in urban areas, was an apparent sense of belonging.

Of course, one of the central problems with using pauper letters is their dual role, both conveying (more or less accurate) information and acting as the key vehicle in a negotiation process between overseer and pauper against the backdrop of a set of Old Poor Law rules that gave no concrete entitlement to relief. The resultant meeting of a prose based system of evidence, customary forms of behaviour and a rule-based system of granting entitlement that left myriad local opportunities for interpretation leaves us with a problem of understanding how far the rhetoric of belonging so apparent in urban pauper letters reflected the lived reality of the poor in the early nineteenth century crisis of the Old Poor Law. A subsidiary problem is how we might reconcile persistent pictures of grinding urban poverty and an increasingly harsh (urban and rural) Old Poor Law regime in the nineteenth century (Hollen Lees 1998) with the relatively positive picture of poor law support, community embededness, a real sense of belonging and the importance of kinship in supporting the urban poor that we garner from pauper letters.

In attempting to break this conundrum, we first need to understand that paupers had little to gain by lying about or exaggerating their economic, neighbourhood or kinship situation. Thomas Sokoll, as we saw earlier, has suggested that Essex paupers were regularly inspected, and while we do not find in Northamptonshire the sort of intensive surveillance mechanisms he suggests, what we do find is a very extensive series of letters from overseers to their contacts in the parishes of residence of the out-parish poor seeking information on those paupers. Indeed, it is often possible to consider the rendering of the pauper's situation by informants alongside the pauper's own rendering of the same situation. In such cases it is very rare for there to be any fundamental contradiction. Moreover, we have seen throughout this article that people often wrote on behalf of paupers or attached testimony to pauper letters, boosting evidence of their deservingness but also providing de facto evidence of belong-

ing. Doctors, landlords, clergymen, neighbours and kin wrote extensively in this and other letters samples. Nor should we forget that paupers themselves went out of their way to emphasise the honesty of their narratives deploying a series of defensive rhetorics such as 'be Assured the above is a statement of real facts', 'I hope I have sufficiently explained my situation', 'for the truth of this you can ask/refer to', and '[Name] can testify to my situation if required'. More than forty letters of this type also offer the names of people in the host locality who might be consulted about the conditions of the individual pauper. When such offers were taken up, the testimony always emphasised the worth and rootedness of the urban poor. We should also perhaps note the frequency with which paupers sought to locate themselves precisely in the urban infrastructure, both because they wished to receive relief directly but also showing that they had a respectable address and were telling the truth. By way of example, just before his death, John Gunnell (the husband of Mary, encountered above) wrote from Manchester to Oxendon to ask for relief due to sickness. He appended a note to the letter advising the overseer that 'I am still in the same house but the Street is much enlarged and the number augmented from 60 to 117'.[42] In turn, it is important to observe that relatively few of those who could have been removed from urban areas under the English and Welsh settlement laws actually were removed back to their parish of settlement, and that overseers in Northamptonshire at least believed the narratives with sufficient conviction to pay for relief in almost all cases. Overseers often had to be prompted several times, they rarely paid on time or as much as they were asked. They might even vary the form and duration of relief. However, such practices were also a reality for the settled and proximate poor and the fact is that out-parish paupers were relieved with unerring regularity. This observation at least begins to explain the disjuncture between contemporary perceptions of the condition of the urban poor and the level of support that seems to have been offered to the out-parish poor, pointing to a stratified urban pauper population in which the pauper relieved by his or home parish was the most supported.

None of this equates to direct evidence that urban paupers were accurately rendering their belonging to host communities and that they experienced belonging in very different ways to their rural counterparts as opposed to simply using more sophisticated and substantial rhetorics of belonging as they sought to establish entitlement. Nonetheless, in this and other samples of pauper narratives we have access to many hundreds of pieces of overseers' correspondence about individual paupers which seems to suggest the probity and accuracy of the writers. Against this backdrop, the distinctive differences between urban and rural paupers in the way they framed their identity and belonging probably does reflect a firmer reality.

[42] NRO 251P/98, Letter 1 December 1833.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Map of English, Welsh and Scottish counties, 1801

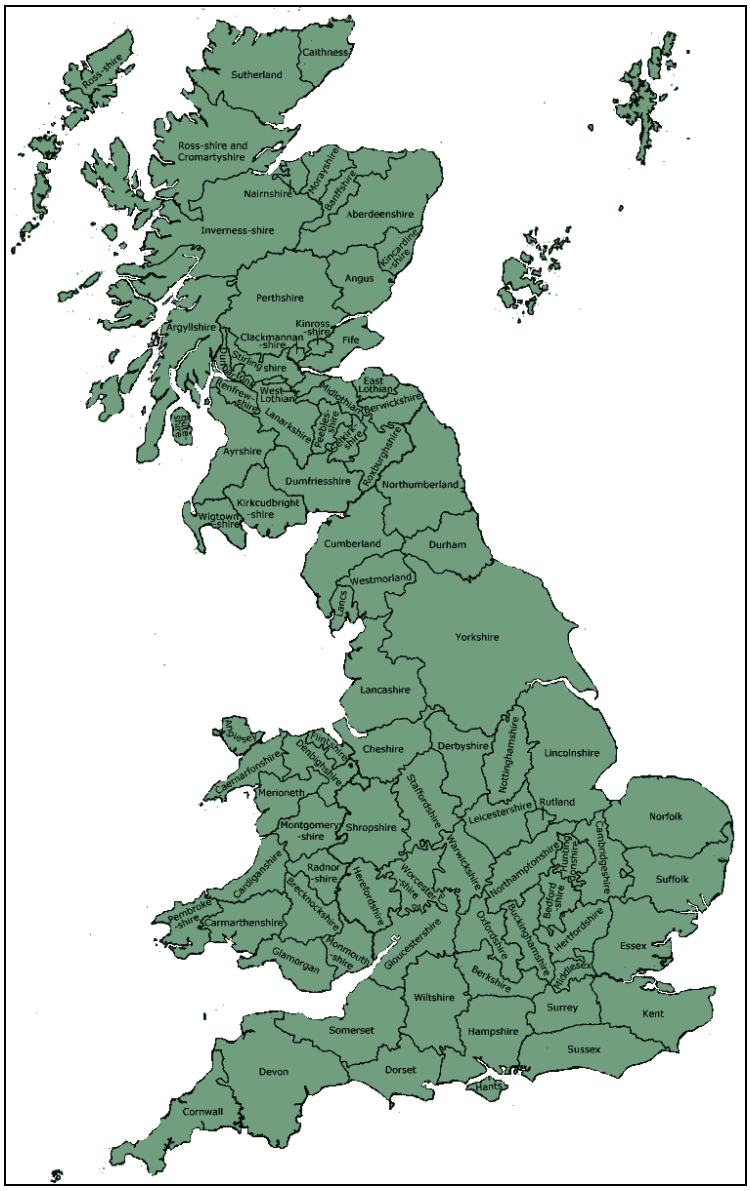
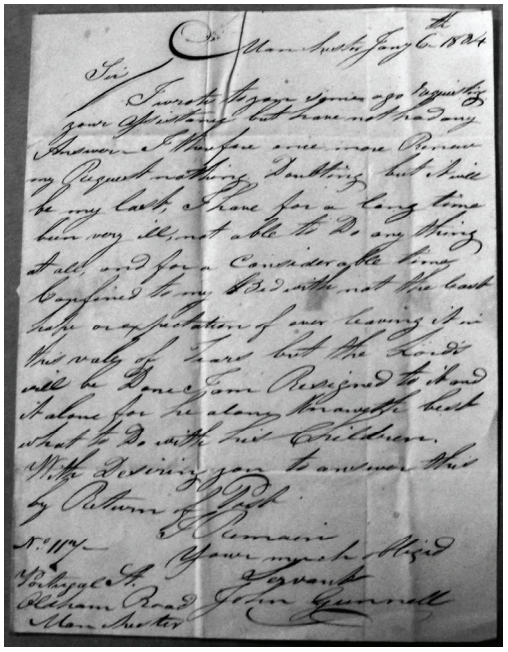
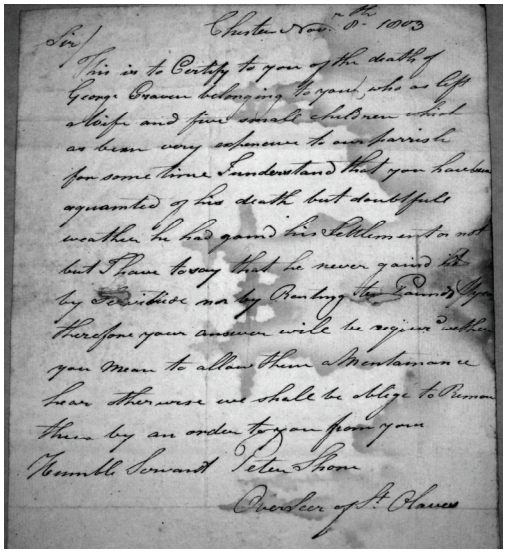


Figure 2: Pauper letter written to Peterborough, January 1804



Source: By kind permission of the Northamptonshire Record Office: Peterborough St. John 261P/242/8.

Figure 3: Letter written on behalf of the wife of George Craven (deceased) from Chester to Peterborough, November 1803



Source: By kind permission of the Northamptonshire Record Office: Peterborough St. John 261P/242/29.